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ABSTRACT

The paper traces the place of total communication in the education of deaf children from its beginning in France to the current time. Evidence is presented which shows the efficacy of total communication and the trend toward its adoption by an increasing number of programs. The use of total communication with nondeaf, special education populations and the resulting positive gains are discussed. Finally, a trend toward the use of total communication in programs for nondeaf individuals is shown and a prediction of an increasing adoption is made. (Author/SBH)

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Total Communication: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

The place of total communication in the education of deaf children in the United States is traced from its beginning in France to the current time. Evidence is presented which shows the efficacy of total communication and the trend toward its adoption by an increasing number of programs. The use of total communication with nondeaf, special populations and the resulting, positive gains are discussed. Finally, a trend toward the use of total communication in programs for nondeaf individuals is shown and a prediction of an even increasing adoption is made.

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Total Communication: Past, Present and Future

Before beginning any discussion of total communication, it is necessary to make clear what is meant here by the term. Often the terms total communication, manual communication, and sign language are used interchangeably. Equally often, no distinction is made between the philosophy of total communication and the method of simultaneous communication. The Conference of Executives of American Schools for the Deaf in 1976, defined total communication as "a philosophy requiring the incorporation of appropriate aural, manual and oral modes of communication in order to ensure effective communication with hearing impaired persons." The method of simultaneous communication is the use of signs simultaneously with speech. It is this second definition, the method, which most educators of nondeaf, special populations intend when they use the term total communication. Therefore, when I speak here about total communication, I am speaking about a method, the method of accompanying speech with sign language.

To anyone who is not familiar with the history of the education of the deaf, it would probably seem self evident that total communication, or more specifically, sign language, would be the logical communication system to be used in teaching deaf individuals. Severely or profoundly deaf people who, by definition, cannot use their sense of hearing for the normal purposes of life (e.g., language and communication) naturally rely on their sense of vision for information about the world. Sign language is entirely visual. On the surface, the fit is as simple as that. Unfortunately, life is not nearly as simple as that. There has been a long, continuing, and often bitter controversy over the place of sign language in the education of deaf people.

The roots of American Sign Language (ASL) can be found in France. The Abbe Charles Michel de l'Epée founded the first public school for the deaf in the world, in Paris, in which he borrowed the signs used by French adults and used

them to teach children. He modified the French sign language by adding markers for tense, gender number and so on. de l'Epée's successor, the Abbe Roch Ambroise Sicard, carried on at the Paris school, but with one notable change. He began to use less and less of de l'Epée's "methodical" signs and relied more on the natural sign language of the deaf Parisians.

It was to study Sicard's methods that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet went to Paris. Gallaudet, who had been sent to England and then France to gather information about methods used to educate deaf children, became intrigued with the success shown by two of Sicard's students at the Paris school. One of those students, Laurent Clerc, later agreed to leave Paris and with Gallaudet travel to America to establish a school for the deaf which would use sign language as its method of communication.

After returning to the United States, Gallaudet established the first school for the deaf in the United States in 1817, what is now the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. The first teacher at the first school for the deaf was a deaf man, so the use of sign language was assured. The early history of the education of the deaf in the United States shows that most of the new publicly supported schools used sign language for instruction. By the 1860s, however, oral only schools began to spring up around the United States. In the late 1800s, Alexander Graham Bell turned his enormous amounts of energy (and wealth) to the fight for the use of oralism and the abolition of sign language.

At about the same time, in 1880, an International Conference on Deafness was held in Milan, Italy. The main report to come out of the conference included the suggestions that (1) sign language interfered with the acquisition of speech and language, and (2) sign language isolated deaf people from the mainstream of society. As a result, the conference recommendation was that all education of all deaf persons should be oral only. This recommendation lead to nearly complete

oralism in Europe, and although many of the schools in America retained the use of sign language, after a time, the most frequently used method of instruction was oral. The question of which method should be used came to be known as the oral-manual controversy. The result of the controversy was a philosophical schism in the education of the deaf which persists today. Each group has its own organizations, publications and spokesmen, and each can present data to "prove" it is the better method.

Total communication is currently the prevalent method of communication at programs for hearing impaired children in the United States. With two colleagues at Gallaudet (Jordan, Gustason & Rosen, 1976) I surveyed nearly 1,000 programs for the deaf in the United States. Eighty two percent of those programs surveyed responded, and from those it was learned that more than sixty four percent of the classes used some form of total communication. Thirty three percent of the classes were taught with an oral only method. What most educators tend to miss, however, is that when comparing total communication with oral only methods, we are not comparing sign language with speech. What we are comparing is speech which is aided by accompanying signs with speech which is not. In fact, several researchers (e.g. Tervoort & Verbeck, 1967; Moores, McIntyre & Weiss, 1972) have found that hearing impaired children who are not taught signs will revert to the use of their own home made signs. Children who are taught orally, still use signs for communication among themselves. What the question really becomes, then, is whether children use an organized sign system (total communication) or an unorganized, home made one (oral) (Bornstein, 1978).

There is an abundance of research data which compares the achievement of hearing impaired children who are educated and raised using sign language with hearing impaired children educated and raised orally. Consistently, the groups which use sign language perform better scholastically and socially. Most

interesting is the fact that when taught with a form of total communication which manually encodes English, deaf children develop an English-like competence (Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972).

A look at changes which schools are making in their method of communication provides an interesting picture of a trend in American education of the deaf. In the 1975 survey, of the 343 programs which reported a recent change in communication method, 333 or ninty seven percent changed to total communication. The trend becomes even clearer when the changes are seen year by year. The number of programs reporting a change has increased each year. This information is presented in graphic form in the Figure. An increasing and continuing trend toward total communication is clearly evident.

The use of total communication with nondeaf populations is growing at a rate which can only be called an explosion. One research study (Goodman, Wilson & Bornstein, 1977) put the number of nondeaf clients being taught sign language at over 10,000. The vast majority of programs using sign language with nondeaf clients began to do so within the last few years. It is safe to say that at a minimum, several hundred programs for nondeaf, disabled persons use a sign system with at least some of their clients. This number is increasing very rapidly. Any report of the number of programs using a total communication is out of date soon after it is out of the typewriter.

Among nondeaf disabled persons, sign language is probably used most often with mentally retarded individuals. In addition, however, I have learned from published reports and personal correspondence that sign language is being taught to individuals who are included among the following categories: aphasic, apraxic, autistic, cerebral palsied, deaf-blind, emotionally disturbed, language disabled, minimal brain dysfunction and neurologically impaired.

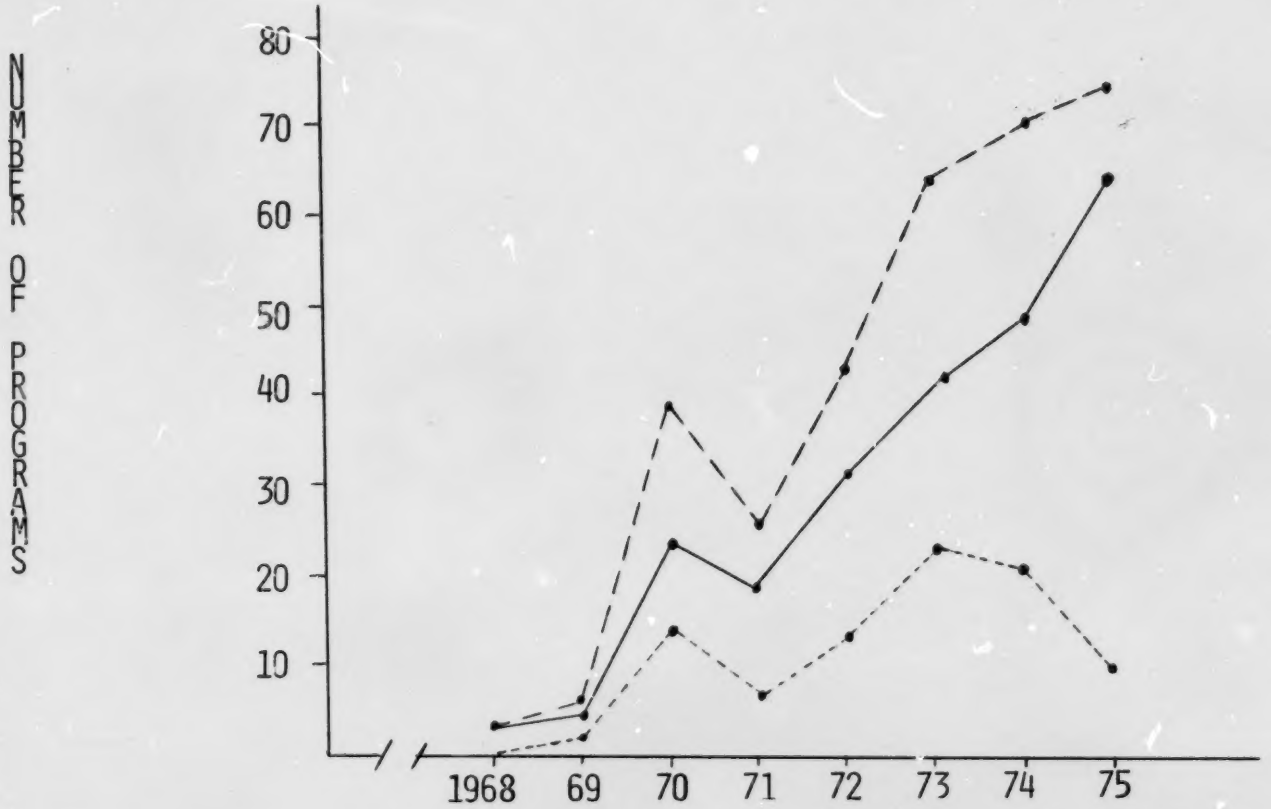

FIGURE NUMBER OF PROGRAMS REPORTING A CHANGE IN COMMUNICATION EACH YEAR.

- - - - - = JUNIOR HIGH & HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

——— = PRESCHOOL & ELEMENTARY PROGRAMS

— — — = TOTAL PROGRAMS

Adopted from Jordan, Gustason & Rosen, 1976.

It is frequently reported from programs with nondeaf, special clients, that individuals who have not learned to speak, even with many years of speech training, have learned to communicate when a total communication program is initiated. I choose the phrase "learned to communicate" carefully. More than one study has reported that children who had never communicated even simple needs after intensive speech therapy began to sign spontaneously after the program changed to total communication (e.g. Shaeffer, Musil, Kollinzas & McDowell, 1977; Fulweiler & Fouts, 1976). What's more, there is increasing evidence that after the initial sign spontaneity, speech spontaneity often begins to accompany signs and eventually replace them (Hubbell, 1977; Grinnel, Detamore & Lippke, 1976). These children do not simply learn to parrot speech, they learn to make spontaneous and novel utterances. What is every bit as interesting, but less frequently focused upon, are the nonlanguage gains that occur when total communication is introduced. In a 1977 survey of programs for the mentally retarded which were known to use total communication (Goodman, Wilson & Bornstein, 1977) fully seventy five percent of the programs reported increases in motivation, attention span, social interactions and vocalizations. Even more striking, more than half of the programs reported fewer behavioral problems after beginning total communication. It seems very clear that with both deaf and nondeaf populations, the use of total communication leads to significant language and behavioral gains.

What of the future of total communication in special education? As this paper has made clear, the "total communication movement" is very large and growing fast. As total communication is adopted by more and different programs, however, one distinction is going to have to be made clear. That is, the distinction between the bilingual approach and the contrived sign system approach.

There is a great deal of evidence that American Sign Language is a separate and distinct language system, complete with its own rule system which is different from the rule system of the American English language. It has been claimed that more than 500,000 Americans are regular users of sign language (O'Rourke, 1972). This would make it the 3rd most frequently used non-English language. For deaf individuals who will become acculturated into the deaf community as they become adults, learning both ASL and English is clearly advantageous. In order to interact completely with the deaf community, one must be able to communicate freely and easily with those members who use the dominant language code of that community. One must be fluent in ASL. For deaf adolescents and adults, then, a bilingual approach is probably best.

For young deaf children and for all nondeaf clients using a total communication system, the goal is to learn the parent language (e.g. English). The grammar of ASL is not the same as that of English, so it may not even be possible for a person to transmit both languages simultaneously. Moreover, it does not seem that an optimal transfer of learning will take place if young children learn only ASL. A contrived sign system, however, uses signs and signed inflections to accompany the spoken language. That is, one signs what one is saying while one is saying it. Signing and speaking simultaneously should provide a person with the same message in two modes--twice the information.

It is this second approach, a manually encoded English, which is and will continue to be used with nondeaf special populations. There is every reason to believe that if the use of sign language improves the language acquisition of deaf children, it will do so with nondeaf, language handicapped children. There is also reason to believe that as more and more evidence is presented showing significant gains in behavior with nondeaf, special populations, the use of sign language will continue to increase. The future of sign language and total communication in special education is a bright one, indeed.

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